

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 3162

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: ELAB, PINT, PINS, TS

SUBJECT: STRIKE PARALYZES PUBLIC TRANSPORT IN TUNIS

REF: TUNIS 2977

1. SUMMARY: UNEXPECTED WILDCAT STRIKE OF BUS WORKERS ON MAY 3 PARALYZED PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM IN TUNIS AND LED TO CLASHES BETWEEN SECURITY FORCES AND STRIKERS. APPARENTLY ERUPTING OVER WORKER DISSATISFACTION WITH PROGRESS IN NEW CONTRACT NEGOTIATIONS, STRIKE DID NOT HAVE SUPPORT OF TRADE UNION LEADERSHIP. UGTT HAS CALLED ON BUS WORKERS TO RETURN TO THEIR JOBS AND HAS THREATENED TO EXPEL ANY ELEMENTS THAT PROMOTED STRIKE. SOME BUS SERVICE RESTORED ON MAY 4, BUT STRIKE APPEARS TO CONTINUE TO DISRUPT PUBLIC TRANSPORT IN CAPITAL. END SUMMARY.

2. TUNIS WAS CAUGHT BY SURPRISE MAY 3 WITH TOTALLY EFFECTIVE WILDCAT STRIKE OF PUBLIC TRANSPORT WORKERS. STRIKE STOPPED ALL BUS LINES FROM EARLY MORNING HOURS AND SUBURBAN COMMUTER TRAIN SERVICE OPERATED BY STATE-OWNED CAPITAL TRANSPORT COMPANY (SNT) WAS STOPPED BY MID-MORNING. TUNIS RESIDENTS DEPENDENT ON SNT WERE LEFT TO WALK TO WORK. LATER IN DAY, WORKERS AT THE STATE-OWNED RAILWAY COMPANY (SNCFT) JOINED THE STRIKE AND STOPPED
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TRAIN SERVICE BETWEEN TUNIS AND SFAX.

3. STRIKE APPARENTLY CAUGHT GOT BY SURPRISE AS WELL. CONTRACT NEGOTIATIONS HAD BEEN GOING ON TO RAISE SALARIES AND PROVIDE SNT EMPLOYEES WITH OTHER IMPROVED BENEFITS. ACCORDING TO TOP LEVEL TRADE UNION SOURCES, PROGRESS HAD BEEN MADE AND THERE WAS NO QUESTION OF IMPASSE. STRIKE WAS APPARENTLY ORGANIZED ON INITIATIVE OF RANK AND FILE ELEMENTS IN EARLY HOURS OF MAY 3 AND THEY QUICKLY WON SUPPORT NECESSARY TO MAKE WORK STOPPAGE FULLY EFFECTIVE.

4. GOT-CONTROLLED NEWS MEDIA IGNORED STRIKE UNTIL LATE AFTERNOON WHEN COUNTER MEASURES COULD BE REPORTED TO

PUBLIC. NEWS BROADCASTS CARRIED GENERAL UNION OF TUNISIAN WORKERS (UGTT) STATEMENT DISOWNING STRIKE, CONDEMNING ITS ORGANIZERS, AND THREATENING TO EXPEL THEM FROM THE UNION. NEWS PROGRAMS ALSO REPORTED NEW BENEFITS ALREADY CONCEDED BY SNT IN CONTRACT NEGOTIATIONS. LATE NEWS BROADCASTS REPORTED THAT STRIKERS HAD ATTEMPTED TO ORGANIZE MARCHES IN FOUR SEPARATE LOCATIONS IN CENTRAL TUNIS BUT WERE DISPERSED BY SECURITY FORCES.

5. IN PRIVATE CONVERSATION WITH SPECIAL ASSISTANT DANIEL HOROWITZ AND EMBASSY OFFICER, UGTT LEADER HABIB ACHOUR ASSERTED THAT COMMUNIST ELEMENTS AND SYMPATHIZERS OF COLONEL QADHAFI WHO HAD INFILTRATED INTO SNT UNION WERE RESPONSIBLE FOR PROVOKING STRIKE. HE REITERATED WARNING PUBLISHED IN UGTT STATEMENT THAT THESE ELEMENTS WOULD BE EXPELLED FROM UNION MOVEMENT. WITH THE AMERICANS IN HIS OFFICE, ACHOUR RECEIVED PHONE CALL FROM PRIME MINISTER NOUIRA WHOM HE TOLD THAT UGTT HAD SENT SEVERAL EXECUTIVE BOARD MEMBERS TO SNT TO END STRIKE AS SOON AS POSSIBLE.

6. COMMENT: A. DESCRIBED BY SOCIAL AFFAIRS MINISTER MOHAMED ENNACEUR TO U.S. OFFICIAL VISITING TUNIS AS A "VERY IMPORTANT STRIKE," THE BUS WORKERS' ACTION CREATED A SERIOUS AND IMMEDIATE PROBLEM FOR GOT. TUNISIANS ARE QUICK TO RECALL THE TENSE SECURITY SITUATION CREATED IN 1973 WHEN STRIKING SNT WORKERS BEGAN COORDINATING ACTION
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WITH STRIKING STUDENTS. IF THE STRIKE IS NOT ENDED SOON, ECONOMIC ACTIVITY IN TUNIS WILL BE ADVERSELY AFFECTED AND RADICAL ELEMENTS SEEKING TO EMBARRASS GOT WILL BE PRESENTED WITH OPPORTUNITY TO PROVOKE CLASHES BETWEEN SECURITY FORCES AND STRIKERS OR UNEMPLOYED LOAFERS UNHAPPY WITH LAST SUNDAY'S FOOTBALL RESULTS (THE TOP-RANKED TUNIS TEAM MOST POPULAR WITH LOWER CLASSES LOST A KEY MATCH.). STRIKE HAS ALREADY EMBARRASSED GOT BY ERUPTING ON DAY BEFORE START OF

PREPARATORY MEETING FOR WORLD EMPLOYMENT CONFERENCE WHICH HAS BROUGHT DELEGATIONS FROM 64 AFRICAN AND WEST ASIAN COUNTRIES TO TUNIS.

B.HABIB ACHOUR'S EXPLANATION THAT STRIKE IS WORK OF COMMUNISTS MAY OR MAY NOT BE TRUE. SUCH ELEMENTS COULD NOT HAVE SUCCEEDED SO EASILY WITHOUT GENUINE GRIEVANCES TO PLAY ON. WE CANNOT JUDGE RESULTS SO FAR OF SNT/UNION CONTRACT NEGOTIATIONS, BUT IT IS WORTH NOTING THAT THIS STRIKE ERUPTED AFTER THE DULLEST MAY 1 CELEBRATIONS IN RECENT YEARS. PRESIDENT BOURGUIBA WAS ABSENT FROM ALL FESTIVITIES AND HIS STAND-IN MOHAMED ENNACEUR DEVOTED HIS SPEECHES TO RECOUNTING CURRENT GOVT SOCIAL POLICY AND PROMISING FULL EMPLOYMENT BY THE END OF THE NEXT FIVE-YEAR PLAN. HE SAID NOTHING OF WAGE INCREASES TO COUNTER EFFECTS OF A NEARLY 10 PERCENT INCREASE IN COST-OF-LIVING INDEX DURING 1975. BUS SERVICE WAS PARTIALLY RESTORED MAY 4, BUT NOT ALL LINES HAVE REINITIATED OPERATIONS. END COMMENT.
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